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ABSTRACT

The communicative skills of listening and nondefensive negotiation for understanding rather than persuasive tactics for coercion are emphasized in this discussion as crucial in helping people deal with the tremendous amount of information received daily. The paper describes some conceptual interconnections between information, communication, and organization. It assumes a systems perspective, presumes the cybernetic nature of social systems, and is based largely on the works of G. Bateson, K.E. Weick, and J. Galbraith. Notions of choice and change, diversity of goals, uncertainty of actions, necessity for stability and flexibility, power/control, and information/communication are analyzed as they relate to organizations. Conclusions point out that maintaining a functional balance between flexibility and stability, instituting structural change, and exercising relational control require that the social systems involved be able to communicate and mutually understand and be understood by one another. (AEA)

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FLEXIBILITY AND STABILITY: A MAJOR COMMUNICATION THEME IN ORGANIZATIONS

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According to the philosopher Richard McKeon (1957), our current interest in the communication process is due to the convergence of three historical trends. The three mentioned operate both within and between cultures and consist of increases in man's a) tolerance of social and individual differences, b) degree of interdependence forced upon us by technological developments, and c) awareness of differences due to the rapid growth of communication technologies. All three of these necessitate that man increase his ability and willingness to process information if he is to survive and avoid the pitfalls of Toffler's future shock. The communicative skills of listening and non-defensive negotiation for understanding rather than persuasive tactics for coercion are emphasized as crucial in helping man deal with the tremendous amount of information received daily.

The ability to process information, however, presumes that communication has already occurred (Drucker, 1967), that people have had sufficient mutual understandings and commonalities of meanings in order to realize how information is to be received, stored, and used for what purposes. Without these prior agreements and commitments, information becomes mere data. It becomes a simple categorization of separateness which increases the sense of separateness between events and people that has little utility for conjoint, interdependent action. An

abundance of information in the context of social interdependence, then, makes the communication process more problematic and more urgent while simultaneously making the process less visible and less traceable. In sum, the necessity of increasing our ability and willingness to deal with differences that make a difference in our personal and social lives, has made the study of communication a major theme of our time.

Modern man is organization man. We spend increasing amounts of time and energy interacting in or with organizational structures. An organization, like an individual, is first and foremost an information-processing system. Both must process and adjust to relevant information about their external and internal environments, in order to effectively maintain and develop themselves. To say that a collective of individuals is organized, is to state that they recognize and metabolize information (Rubin, 1975) in predictable ways through predictable networks to obtain predicted results. The fact of being organized, then, presupposes the ability to communicate and requires continual participation in the process of communication in order to be maintained. Repetitive, predictable activities are inherently subject to decay and must be continually re-accomplished and re-experienced in order to be sustained. Hence, information, communication and organization room together in the same conceptual house (Miller, 1953), each needing the other for sustenance

and requiring the other for survival.

This paper concerns itself with the interconnections between these three roommates; how each effects and is effected by the other. The purpose of this paper is not to prescribe particular answers to common problems, but to describe some conceptual interconnections that may help clarify the questions. The thoughts that follow assume a systems perspective, presume the cybernetic nature of social systems and are based largely on the works of Bateson (1972), Weick (1969) and Galbraith (1973). Each of these authors, to varying degrees, emphasizes that the transactional rules within which information is processed must be re-examined and probably changed. Hopefully, this paper will aid in this re-examination process.

Notions of choice and change. The study of communication is a major theme of our time precisely because the enumeration of choices and the establishment of relational rules occur and are changed through communicative behaviors. Regardless of the rational strengths of the intended plan of action and/or the design elegance of the organizational structure, the intended results and intermediate steps must be exchanged and shared if they are to be effectively implemented. More importantly, the process of exchanging the information is as influential as the original plan in effecting the results of organized actions. As the sociologist Duncan (1968) has stated, people don't relate and

then talk, rather we relate in talk. People aren't organized and then process information and perform required actions, rather they become organized through the processing of information and the performing of actions that are only afterwards judged to be necessary or effective or efficient. Organized actions are problematic and must be continually re-accomplished in order to be sustained, considered efficient, and provide a sense of membership in a group. Given these actions are problematic, they must be controlled through a set of relationships defining who is to perform what behaviors in which situations. These control relationships constitute the organizational structure and constrain the subjective meanings embedded in organizational life.

Meanings are assigned retrospectively to what has happened. They are not given by goal statements and plans, but emerge from past actions to justify and clarify what has already occurred. Put simply, we don't know what we are doing until after we've done it. But given we've done something, we're prone to believe that our post-hoc interpretations of events have "caused" those events.

Once an interpretation of past events has emerged, we tend to support that meaning by allowing it to direct our future actions. In so doing, we actively create and sustain our "reality" by letting our purposes restrict our consciousness. We severely constrain our conscious awareness by limiting our attention to the types of

information consistent with our now stated purposes, goals and plans. In other words, man lives in his own "enacted environment" (Weick, 1969) which is created by constraining conscious awareness to primarily, if not only, the types of information consistent with one's purposes. Further, it is this "enacted environment," this verbal edifice constructed from symbols and buttressed and barricaded by purposes, that is acted upon by the processes of communicating and organizing and nothing more.

Man is a rationalizing not a rational animal, and much of our conjoint activity is aimed at making sense of what has been rather than specifying what will be. This is not to deny or belittle the importance of pre-decisional planning, which is made even more crucial in uncertain situations, but to remind us that plans do not "cause" behavior. "Goals are sufficiently diverse, the future is sufficiently uncertain, and the actions on which goal statements could center are sufficiently unclear, that goal statements exert little control over actions" (Weick, 1969:37).

This quote from Weick introduces the control issue central to organizational life,--the establishment and maintenance of the delicate balance between flexibility and stability in rapidly changing, turbulent environments.

Goals are sufficiently diverse. First, there is the inherent diversity between individual and organizational goals and subjective purposes. The individual will inevitably expect and demand more freedom and rewards than the organization will be willing to grant. Similarly, the organization will inevitably demand and require more loyalty and predictability than the individual wants to manifest (Simmel, 1950). This source of conflict is a constant in organized life and cannot be avoided or wished away even though its divisive, competitive, suspicious effects can be de-emphasized through structural design and interpersonal competency variables.

Secondly, modern bureaucratic organizations have evolved from earlier forms by incorporating advancing specialization. The wedding of science and technology has propagated the tremendous knowledge explosion characteristic of our time. But specialization in function and conscious awareness fragments the organizational members making the issues of coordination, mutual understanding, and communication more problematic. The specialist has telescoped his vision so that it is characterized by little breadth but much depth within a limited range of activities and information. He expects to and is rewarded for perceiving events along relatively narrow lines and is generally more concerned with the particulars of his speciality than with larger organizational issues.

The increasing presence of specialists creates tremendous control problems by a) requiring more and more information about smaller and smaller decision areas, and b) undermining the principle of expertise that has justified the authority structure of bureaucratic organizations (Thompson, 1961). The specialist has the ability to decide within his area but not the right to decide which is retained by the manager who may only dimly understand what the "experts" are doing. This potential source of erosion of the legitimacy of authority simply aggravates the pluralistic tendencies of bureaucratic structures, making coordination and mutual understanding more problematic. The above assertions suggest organizations are best viewed as coalitions where decisions are political arrangements within which power and influence are traded for resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1977; Caplow, 1968). This coalition metaphor seems even more descriptive of organizational life when it is considered that economic realities, in the short-run anyway, often make decisions appear more zero-sum and competitive than non-zero-sum and cooperative.

Actions are sufficiently unclear. As the presence and importance of specialization increases, the degree of uncertainty surrounding action decisions increases. Uncertainty has been defined as "the difference between the amount of information required to perform the task and the

amount of information already possessed by the organization" (Galbraith, 1973:5). Although this definition lacks operational rigor, it does emphasize the relational forces operating within a modern organization and is useful for our purposes.

The degree of uncertainty is hypothesized by Galbraith to be related to organizational design, control and interpersonal communicative skills in the following manner: 1) as the level of uncertainty increases, the amount of information required for effective and efficient task performance increases, as do the costs of gathering, handling and storing that information. 2) As the level of information required increases, the amount of time spent planning increases and the number of decisions necessary for task completion increases. 3) As the number of decisions increases, the hierarchy is more likely to become overloaded and thus pressures for pushing decisions down the hierarchy increase. 4) As the number of decisions pushed down the hierarchy increases, the problems of coordination and efficiency increase. The organization becomes increasingly dependent upon the lateral, interpersonal relations within the system and less dependent upon the vertical information channels. 5) But, as the dependence upon the lateral relations increases, the need for adequate interpersonal relations between organizational members increases. As this need increases, the factors of interpersonal trust and communicative competency (i.e.,

the capacity to mutually understand, tolerate differences and constructively resolve conflicts) become even more necessary. 6) However, the same forces increasing the need for interpersonal trust and communicative competency are also those that make the establishment of these variables more difficult--i.e., specialization and rising amounts of uncertainty.

Further, the specialist as an individual tends to be a professional in outlook and is at least as concerned with, if not more interested in, the performance of her professional activities and memberships as she is with the needs of the particular organization employing her. On the one hand, the specialist needs an employer to perform her specialty; the employer, in turn, needs her in order to survive and successfully compete in a rapidly changing environment. On the other hand, the specialist is likely to be less dedicated to a particular organization, and, therefore, less likely to compromise for the sake of the organization while simultaneously less able to take the larger, multi-functional perspective necessary for effective and efficient organizational planning and performance.

The prevalence of the specialist, then, contains both forces for centralization and decentralization of the organizational structure. On the one hand, specialists are expensive and require a fairly large, profitable organization in order to be employed. Secondly, with increasing numbers of specialists, there come increas-

ing problems of coordination and interdependence which encourages the development of a centralized integrator who can force decisions on warring factions when necessary for organizational survival and development. The economies of scale and significance of coordination then, increase the pressure for centralization. On the other hand, the specialist is relatively autonomous and expects to make relatively independent decisions during work, and must be allowed to make these decisions if the organization is to be responsive to rapidly changing environments and situations. This required functional autonomy combined with subjective expectations concerning discretionary power, increase the pressures for a decentralized control structure.

Thus, the modern organization is faced with a serious dilemma of how to simultaneously centralize and decentralize its control structure. Some functions like accounting, legal services, advertising, public relations, research and development are probably better suited for centralized locations than those related more directly to production. Which of these functions will be centralized, and when, and how, are crucial organizational decisions faced by modern organizations in their attempts to survive and prosper in a rapidly changing, highly competitive market place.

Perrow (1977) has called this dilemma the "bureaucratic paradox" and suggests it's largely due to an

unawareness of the control devices available to organizational managers. He maintains that there are at least three orders of control devices. The most visible are first-order devices such as a) direct orders and surveillance and b) rules and regulations. Rules and regulations are more impersonal and efficient but lose "the flexibility of direct orders" (1977:6). Furthermore, as materials of production and employee skills, backgrounds, attitudes, and specialities vary, tne number of rules propagated will necessarily increase. As the number of rules and regulations increase, the flexibility in terms of response time to varying contingencies and alternative ways of responding will necessarily decrease.

Second-order controls mentioned by Perrow are standardization and specialization. Although these are usually thought of as having a technical basis, they also control people by limiting the number and range of choices to which a person has to attend.

Third-order controls are the least visible and refer to the shaping of premises, to the shape of a largely unconscious and unexamined set of assumptions directing attention to some informational bits and evoking predictable, habituated responses to the differences perceived (1977:10). These third-order controls are "perhaps one of the most powerful of all control devices" because they involve an "indoctrination into the values of the larger system that sustain the particular organi-

zation" (1977:10). An awareness of these values, these unexamined premises that frame information processing, is the way out of the bureaucratic paradox for "it is only when premises can be controlled that extensive decentralization and delegation can take place" (1977:14).

By examining its unexamined premises, management can flex its stabilizing patterns and regain some of the lost flexibility by allowing employees more discretion in more decisions. An open admission of one's values, biases, inherent perceptual distortions about "reality" does not negate those values or necessitate their abandonment. It does, however, allow for their refinement and the inclusion of other values and ways of thinking that may be more useful in varying situations.

In short, Perrow advises that the efficient organization will centralize in order to decentralize certain types of decisions. These decisions about how to centralize and what to decentralize are crucial for organizational survival since any social system can "continue to exist only to the degree that they are able to maintain a balance between flexibility and stability" (Weick, 1969:39).

Stability is necessary for efficient handling of various contingencies and functions. It provides the organization and its members a sense of identity about who they are, what they do, what they value and how they should react and act upon inputs from their environment. Stable relations, by establishing memories and precon-

ceived plans of action to be repetitively applied, provide a set of regularities that can be exploited for the efficient and effective processing of information and materials. Over time, the repetitive application of established procedures, rules, values, and actions becomes a relatively unconscious and thus less time-consuming, less energy demanding, and more efficient process. However, reliance on past practices, procedures and values may become increasingly ineffective within turbulent environments.

Flexibility is required in order to functionally adjust to unexpected and frequently unpredictable changes in both the organization's internal and external environments. The organization must be continually evaluating and monitoring the very practices and procedures it takes for granted, identifies itself through, and uses as the bases for action decisions. It must develop the habit of doubting its own past wisdom by periodically "scrambling" its own decision making processes and value priorities, while simultaneously maintaining sufficient stability for identity maintenance and collective commitment to conjoint, interdependent action. The requirements of stability and flexibility are then, in the short-run at least, mutually exclusive and require responsive, open, managerial styles in order to be effectively balanced.

Much of organizational literature has focused on the needs for stability, on the control and power processes necessary for efficient, effective, economical organizational performance and will not be repeated here. The notion of flexibility, however, has received much less attention. This lack of emphasis may be a severe deficiency in our thinking since it may well be the case that:

> The pathologies of our time may broadly be said to be the accumulated results of this process--the eating up of flexibility in response to stresses of one sort or another...and the refusal to bear with those by-products of stress... (Bateson, 1972:497).

The steps in this "eating up of flexibility" process were implied earlier and will be briefly outlined. (The interested reader is encouraged to see Bateson, 1972:496-503).

Eating up of flexibility. Bateson begins his discussion by defining flexibility as the "uncommitted potentiality for change" (1972:497). He reminds us that any social system runs on ideas of varying levels of generality which are interconnected and interwoven into sets of beliefs, patterns of thought, basic value premises and are sustained through repeated behavioral patterns in context. The flexibility of these ideas as justifications for action may become problematic. First, certain ideas which initially have survival value are repeatedly used and then set aside for immediate use without thoughtful inspection of their relevancy in the presently existing situation--habit formation. Secondly,

these ideas become clustered, and are organized into related perceptual and conceptual sets. These sets implicitly and sometimes explicitly deny the relevance of other possible sets--habitual modes of consciousness are created. Thirdly, given these modes of perceiving and thinking become habituated, they become hard-programmed premises. They become our unconscious and unexamined set of assumptions which are unavailable for inspection and are not re-analyzed in the light of new information. Our once useful habits are now the invisible premises within which information is analyzed--consciousness becomes habitually constrained. The premises themselves, therefore, become self-fulfilling, self-sealing and self-maintaining because they are not doubted but effectively close out new information which would allow their inspection.

If the premises are not open to inquiry, they are not exercised or "flexed" and become inflexible because they are no longer consciously visible but set the parameters within which consciousness is constrained. Thus the flexibility necessary for survival becomes "eaten up" through the vicious cycle of a) creating explicit rules for behaviors in various situations, b) these rules become the implicit laws of performance, but these laws cannot deal with all possible contingencies, so c) more explicit rules and laws are developed to deal with even more behaviors in ever changing situations; but d) the

more explicit the rule, the more likely it is to deal with the superficialities of social relations and the less likely it is to make visible the implicit premises on which it is based, so e) the more time, energy, and resources spent on enforcing expectations which regulate increasingly superficial aspects of the situation, which leads to f) more rules, etc. in an ever-increasing breadth of regulation and ever-decreasing depth of conscious awareness and analysis. As with Perrow, this cycle can only be controlled by allowing information processors to "flex" their discretionary powers rather than increasing the number of stabilizing, but increasingly irrelevant rules.

In summation, the more rules and expectations constraining behavior, the more that authority/management is concerned with enforcing the expected rather than evaluating the implicit premises upon which the rules are based. This, in turn, leads to more "tinkering" with the solutions to past problems which makes functional adaptation to present problems increasingly problematic. The intended "solutions" become a major part of the problem, because the problem has never been identified and dealt with. Unless we explicitly "scramble" our thinking habits and question our premises used to justify policies and behavioral arrangements, we become inflexible in terms of those premises and our choices become increasingly narrowed as we become increasingly dependent upon the regulatory, habituated patterns that have developed.

These concerns are relevant to organizations in that this process of eating up flexibility is specifically the focus of organizing processes which are directed at removing uncertainty from the informational environment (Weick, 1969:40). Moreover, the organization is rewarded, through the short-run decrease in costs, for removing uncertainty and applying certain procedures to uncertain information.

It is the explicit purpose of organizing processes to reduce, absorb and avoid uncertainty by attempting to keep events within the pre-established categories, control networks and material flow patterns as the following quote illustrates.

> First, they [organizations] avoid the requirements that they correctly anticipate events in the distant future by using decision rules emphasizing short-run reaction to short-run feedback rather than anticipation of long-run uncertain events. They solve pressing problems rather than develop long-run strategies. Second, they avoid the requirements that they anticipate future reactions of other parts of their environment by arranging a negotiated environment. They impose plans, standard operating procedures, industry tradition, and uncertainty-absorbing contracts on that environment. In short, they achieve a reasonably manageable decision situation by avoiding planning where plans depend on prediction of uncertain future events and by emphasizing planning where the plans can be self-confirming through some control device (Cyert & March, 1964:293).

The first avoidance is the classic management by crisis style and the second illustrates Bateson's self-fulfilling eating-up of flexibility process.

However, if the organization is to survive, functionally adapt and institute structural changes, it must develop the habit of periodically re-analyzing the premises upon which it is based, has prospered, and presently finds rewarding. This is no small task to say the least. But what choice do we have in an ever-changing, increasingly interdependent world?

Movement is not change. One conceptual distinction that will help us periodically re-examine our premises is the difference between first- and second-order change suggested by Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974). These authors posit that first-order changes are analogous to movement or change in position. They suggest that the Theory of Groups is a useful thought model about first-order change, about persistance since the movements are basically stabilizing, homeostatic, deviation-counteracting mechanisms. At this level, it is indeed the case that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Second-order change, on the other hand, is analogous to acceleration, to meta-change or change of change. A useful thought model here is the Theory of Logical Types with its basic axiom that whatever "involves all of a collection must not be one of the collection" (1974:6). In their view, change is only of the second-order which necessitates the use of flexible, adaptive, deviation-amplification mechanisms. Change then, involves a

repatterning of the interactional structure of the system per se rather than just different moves within a given relational structure. Frequently, the initiation of second-order change involves little more than an overt awareness of the operating premises governing and justifying the system to itself and thereby constraining the system's awareness within the premises' self-sealing boundaries. The old nine-dot exercise is discussed as a classic example of the self-sealing characteristic of unarticulated, habituated premises that constrain our thoughts and "eat up flexibility."

Power is not control. A second conceptual distinction that will help maintain a functional balance between flexibility and stability is the realization that power and control are not at the same conceptual level (Baumgartner et al., 1976). Power refers to the ability to impose a preferred outcome within a given set of relational rules. Power is concerned with the making of strategic choices within the rules of the "game" in order to "win" or achieve one's desired goal(s), purpose(s) or outcome(s).

Control, however, refers to "meta-power . . . that is, control over social relationships and structures . . ." (1976:224). Relational control is at a higher level of analysis than power and concerns the ability to change the rules of the "game" rather than just playing well

within them. Power, then, is a first-order concept in Watzlawick's et al. terms while control is a second-order concept. Power can be accumulated and players can move from position to position within a given transactional pattern even though the structural pattern per se is out of control. Control, as distinct from power and authority, emerges from what the interacting systems do interdependently, rather than being possessed or achieved unilaterally by one system within the situation.

Information is not communication. A third conceptual distinction, involving a shift in the unit of analysis, reminds us that transmitting information is not communication. As Drucker (1967) asserts, the former presumes the latter and is only useful if communication has already occurred. Information refers to differences that make a difference (Bateson, 1972) and is primarily a monadic concept. An open, symbolic system cannot not inform itself of either content or relationship differences. Given that raw sensory inputs are received by some system, they will be categorized, metabolized and stored for possible future use. Of course, what differences are categorized, how they are metabolized and where they are stored are largely determined by our purposes and unconscious premises constraining our level of awareness. But given a single system has informed itself, this information must be exchanged to make a difference in interdependent contexts.

This exchange of information, the communication process, necessitates at least two information-processing systems--although this author would agree with Weick (1969) that a triadic analysis is the minimum number useful for analysis of organizational communication patterns. Further, the exchange of information necessitates some degree of mutual understanding about the differences acknowledged if those perceived differences are to make a difference in the way the individual systems exchange messages, organize themselves and make mutually beneficial decisions. The communication process, then, is a social one requiring at least two participants and some minimal degree of shared meaning. But given it is a social process, the individual participants making up the communication system will be concerned primarily, though not necessarily consciously, with how they interrelate, with the shape of their relational pattern.

> Mammals in general, and we are among them, care extremely, not about episodes, but about the patterns of their relationships. . . . This is what mammals are about. They are concerned with patterns of relationship, with where they stand in love, hate, respect, dependency, trust, and similar abstractions vis-a-vis somebody else. This is where it hurts us to be in the wrong. If we trust and find that that which we have trusted was untrustworthy; or if we distrust, and find that that which we distrusted was in fact trustworthy, we feel <u>bad</u>. The pain that human beings and all other mammals can suffer from this type of error is extreme (Bateson, 1972:470).

Given we are concerned with these relational patterns, with how we stand in relation to each other, these

concerns will strongly effect what, how, when and with whom information is exchanged. An awareness of these rules, these largely "unconscious" premises that govern participation in the communication process, will increase the odds that organizations will efficiently and effectively process information and maintain a functional degree of flexibility in their interactional, decision-making dynamics.

In conclusion, maintaining a functional balance between flexibility and stability, instituting structural change and exercising relational control require that the social systems involved be able to communicate and mutually understand and be understood by one another. Mutual understanding, of course, is not a sufficient condition for realizing these balances or exercising relational control within the socio-economic context of interdependence for resources. Just because social systems mutually understand one another does not guarantee that they will discontinue playing self-destructive power games where the moves are known but the premises unexamined. However, it seems unlikely that these short-run power plays can be controlled and transactional rules and premises periodically examined and changed unless the parties do mutually understand each other and the relational structure within which they interact.

Genuine tolerance of another's rights and a certain degree of trust are required if the parties are to

control their transactions rather than be manipulated and abused by past decisions and short-run power strategies. Tolerance and trust are not necessarily part of the power games and may actually be disadvantageous within certain structural contexts. Perhaps this is why these qualities are infrequently found.

Trust, tolerance, recognition of another's right to be different--these are indeed fragile, risky, uncertain qualities on which to rest our chances for survival, growth and prosperity. But without these qualities, our chances drop drastically. Communication is the theme of our time because through it the fragile social bonds necessary for personal, organizational and cultural well-being are developed, maintained and changed. Without these bonds, events dictate our actions, and we will remain trapped within the "games without end" created by our un-inspected premises. We either create these bonds, or we don't. The choice is ours.

Epilogue: The Power Game

Why must I be superior to you?
How can I be superior to you when I'm not sure where I am---
let alone where you are---
so how can I know that you're inferior?

But if I am to feel superior to you, then you must feel
superior to me,
which means I am inferior to you.
I don't like that.
I don't like to feel inferior and
I definitely don't like being told I'm inferior.
So what can I do?

I can try and prove my superiority
by forcing you to accept your inferiority to me
so that
I don't have to accept my own.
Problem---the more I show my superiority, the more I have to
continue doing so,
because
deep down I know there will be someone I'm inferior to.
I don't like that
and, more importantly,
I don't like that you know that about me.
So, I must be suspicious and constantly look for my enemies.

Another thing I can do is to admit my inferiority
and let you be superior
so that you can be suspicious instead of me.
Problem--I can't do that either because other people don't
like being with inferior people any more than I do.
So, I must be fearful and constantly look out for my friends
who have become comfortable with my inferiority.

Couldn't we share the feelings and positions of superiority
and inferiority?
Problem---that is risky because who's going to decide how often
we alternate,
can you be trusted
can I be trusted
to play the parts appropriately when assigned?

What else can I do?
(If no answer seem appropriate, then maybe the
question is wrong?)
Stop playing!
Stop making discreet judgements
based on outworn criteria about continually moving,
ever-changing processes.
Can WE do this? Do WE have a choice?

Is our only alternative to continue the suspicion and fear?

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